Thoughts on dialectology in 2026

Dialectologists have shown a passion in their subject that you might compare to Star Wars fans or football fans in the modern day. Thomas Hallam used all his spare time to go around the country by rail and find dialect-speakers to interview. Joseph Wright turned down a lucrative position as a professor in Canada because he wanted to finish his English Dialect Dictionary. Michael V. Barry risked electrocution by plugging a sound-recorder into a light socket in the Isle of Man, at a time when the supply of electricity on the island was still working on its safety, just to get a recording of Anglo-Manx dialect. Harold Orton worked every day in a year, even at Christmas, on the questionnaire for the Survey of English Dialects. When the University of Leeds refused to allocate any more funding to the Survey, Orton and his team worked for free to get it finished.

Where is this passion now? We have more technology than ever. Whereas Alexander John Ellis might have been prevented from visiting a helpful correspondent in Annfield Plain (County Durham) by snow on the hill, we can have video-calls any time of day to find dialect speakers around the globe.

A simple answer here might be that there are not enough dialect speakers left. This would fit in with Stanley Ellis's comment: "Harold Orton often told us that it was the eleventh hour, that dialect was rapidly disappearing, and that this [the Survey of English Dialects] was a last-minute exercise to scoop out the last remaining vestige of dialect before it died out under the pressures of modern movement and communication." This might explain why rural areas were prioritised. The Survey was considerably more urban in the West Riding of Yorkshire; elsewhere, the only urban areas covered were Fleetwood, Hackney (London), Harwood (Bolton), Newport and Washington. In 2026, there are still cities in England that have never had any dialect work done on them. Are they not interesting? Are there not dialects in some urban areas that might die out soon if they are not recorded?

The continued existence of the Yorkshire Dialect Society shows that there is amateur interest in the Society. Just as Star Wars fans would never allow academics to monopolise their passion for their favourite film, dialect-lovers should not allow dialectology to become confined to academia. This is not to demean the fine dialect studies done at universities, but the safeguards of data protection and privacy make it very hard work to undertake a mass survey now. For dialectology to reach its full potential, it needs to make the most of the enthusiasm of ordinary people. The

internet connects us more than ever: now we just need to get talking and recording. Voluntary work online should never be underestimated.